

How to Give a Lousy Presentation

Fifteen ways to make a bad impression

By Carmine Gallo

Giving truly great presentations requires skill, work, and practice. Giving catastrophic presentations is far easier. So if you want to take the easy way out and look like a rank amateur, here are 15 surefire tips to guarantee that you leave a really, really bad impression.

1. "Misspell" words. Failing to check the spelling on your slides shows a complete lack of care. If you don't care enough to proof your presentation, your audience will care less about you and your message. It's the easiest way to look unprofessional.
2. Create distracting color combinations. Blue on green is especially hard to read.
3. Use inconsistent fonts. Professional PowerPoint designers will use no more than two, perhaps three, font styles in an entire presentation. But why stop there? There are thousands of typefaces available. See how many you can incorporate into your slide show.
4. Use a really small font size. If you really want to drive people crazy, say something like this: "I know you can't read this, but if you could, here is what it would say..."
5. Insert improperly sized photos that are stretched to fit the slide. Images used in PowerPoint slides should be at least 900 pixels wide by 720 high. Designers start with larger images and shrink them to fit the slide. If you really want to look bad, however, find much smaller thumbnail images, say 200 x 300 pixels, and simply stretch them to fit the slide. They will look blurry, cheap, and bush-league.
6. Look completely and totally disinterested. I attended a conference in which the keynote speaker hadn't even bothered to create a presentation and had a few handwritten notes in front of him. That's fine, if you can pull it off. This speaker could not. He shuffled through his notes, lost his place several times, and twice asked the organizer, "How much time do I have?" The people in the audience—influential venture capitalists—found this so appalling that they started looking at each other and laughing.
7. Look disheveled. If you really want to leave a bad impression, wear faded blue jeans, worn, dirty shoes, and a stained shirt.
8. Read every word of each slide. Better yet, turn your back to the audience and read your slides word for word.
9. Don't bother with a backup plan. If you need a live Internet connection to demo a site, don't bother making a screen shot of the site in case the connection doesn't work. That way, you'll be at a complete loss for words when the connection fails.

10. Don't practice. At all. Practicing a presentation out loud takes work and will make you look far too polished. Just wing it.

11. Call attention to your mistakes. If you want to show a complete lack of preparation, say something like "Oops, I have no idea how that slide got in there."

12. Open with an offensive or off-color joke. Half your audience will walk out immediately and you'll have succeeded in making a really bad impression right out of the gate.

13. Use wild animations. Letting text simply fade into a slide is way too straightforward. Especially when PowerPoint offers you the bounce, the boomerang, and the dreaded "neutron," which makes letters circle wildly. All are effective at giving your audience a headache.

14. Use cartoon clip art. Why spend \$3 on high-resolution photos from a stock photography service such as iStockphoto when there are plenty of cheap-looking and free cartoons that will make your presentation look like a sixth-grade project?

15. Use ancient presentation software. PowerPoint 2003 served its purpose (I used it for years). But there's no comparison with PowerPoint 2007, which is simply a better, more robust tool. Says Darla Wigginton, an expert PowerPoint designer and creative director at eVision Design in San Francisco, "When [PowerPoint] 2007 came out, it scared the design world because the average user could now create some impressive-looking work." Why scare professional designers? Stick to older versions of the software and leave the slicker presentations to others.

I hope you find some of these tips memorable enough to avoid them at all costs. But make no mistake, these presentation "techniques" are alive, well, and thriving. Just when I think I've seen or heard it all, someone has one more observation to add to the list. Feel free to use the comments section below to add your own experiences. We look forward to hearing from you.

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